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SUBJECT: Flash Report – Potential for Violence at the Toms River Post Office
(LB-FR-00-001)

This flash report provides interim information on the potential for violence at the Toms River, New Jersey, Post Office. This review was initiated as the result of a congressional inquiry by Representative Jim Saxton (Project Number 00JR009LB000). The employees at the Toms River Post Office alleged harsh working conditions and abusive management style.

We found a confrontational and hostile workplace climate at the Toms River Post Office, which we believe, has the potential for violence. Our conclusion is based on first-hand observations and interviews with 50 employees and 10 managers. This report presents evidence of confrontational communication styles, verbal abuse, and aggressive management practices. The following is a description of some of the actions that reinforced our conclusion.

The postmaster had a .38 caliber shell on his desk and handled the shell during our interview with him. Having a .38 caliber shell in the workplace presents a potentially threatening situation when it is displayed during conversations.



Picture of the .38 caliber shell on the desk of the Toms River Post Office Postmaster

Additionally, the postmaster acknowledged having an exchange with an employee whom the postmaster accused of pushing him. The employee and a union official confirmed the confrontation and the employee said the exchange included a threatening challenge from the postmaster, which included "if you want me, you know where I live." During our interview, the postmaster stated that he did not remember this challenge during this exchange, but that he may have made similar statements under other circumstances.

One of the acting supervisors was described by employees as having a bad temper and by the postmaster as "volatile." We also documented that this supervisor has a police record for assaulting a neighbor. The postmaster stated that he was not aware of any of his supervisors having a police record but he would be concerned if this were the case.

In reviewing disciplinary records, we found this supervisor has a history of violent behavior. We found two letters of warning, one issued December 18, 1999, for violating the zero tolerance policy for acts and threats of violence in the workplace. Specifically, the acts and threats included the use of profane and vulgar language during a verbal confrontation with another employee. A second letter was issued January 2, 2000, for his involvement in a motor vehicle accident, and failure to report the accident and remain on the scene.

We asked the postmaster why this individual was selected to supervise employees and he stated that the employee has tremendous potential and knowledge of the routes. However, the postmaster admitted that the supervisor needed to improve his communication skills. The postmaster further stated that he was aware of a letter of warning but not of the specific charges. Although the postmaster did not recall the specifics regarding the letters of warning, both were issued during his tenure.

Another example that created tension in the workplace involves following and timing employees when they used the restrooms, which one supervisor verified as a common practice during inspections. This supervisor also admitted she entered a hospital emergency room uninvited and demanded that an employee complete a report of injury while he was being treated by a physician.

While at the Toms River Post Office, we witnessed a volatile exchange among three male supervisors, the postmaster, and a female employee. Although the union steward was present, the interaction involved shouting and resulted in the female employee becoming hysterical and crying. On several occasions during the exchange, the postmaster attempted to calm the acting supervisor, who was standing and shouting at the seated employee. Afterwards, employees told us that this type of supervisory behavior was normal.

Although we viewed the behavior as extremely aggressive and violent, when we spoke with the employee involved, she stated this interaction was not as aggressive as usual

because of the Office of Inspector General presence in the facility. Behavior of this type is a violation of the Postal Service's zero tolerance policy on behavior and violence in the workplace.

Our interviews with employees revealed that they were fearful of the current work environment. We asked 30 employees to rate the climate on a scale of zero to ten, with zero being a typical work environment and ten being a violent work environment. The average rating was 8.5. Employees stated that the current environment is a "ticking time bomb," and that they believe that someone is going to start shooting.

We did discuss our concerns regarding the hostile workplace climate with the manager, Workplace Environment Improvement at Postal Service Headquarters. She stated that she was aware of the situation at the Toms River Post Office, and that she was waiting on the New York Metro Area Human Resources manager to provide her with an update on the situation.

Once we complete our report we will include specific recommendations. In the meantime, we are providing this information so that you may take corrective action as deemed necessary. However, we would appreciate your providing us in writing, information on any actions you take regarding this matter.

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